THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

To Follow A Star

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John M. Buchanan

This reality, incomprehensible wonder of my almighty love, I have sheltered safely in the stable of your world. I am there. I no longer go away from this world, even if you do not see me now. I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles. They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas. Christmas that lasts forever.

Karl Rahner

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

TO FOLLOW A STAR

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12
"Arise, shine; for your light has come," Isaiah 60:1

It's an exciting time of the year for football and basketball fans. In fact, it was impossible not to be caught up in it all this week. But on the near horizon, another star is beginning to shine. Spring training is just weeks away.

Lovers of the sport of baseball know about the power of hope. Followers of the local franchise, particularly, understand in the very depths of their souls, both the potential for joy, but also the very real demands and commitment required to be a person of hope year in and year out in the consistent absence of success. Hope entails the ability to see something that is not yet here. Hope entails trusting in potentialities and possibilities often in the face of contradictory evidence. Hope is more than wishful thinking. True hope demands action, risk-taking, commitment, perhaps even suffering.

> "Honey, it's 40 degrees. The wind will be howling in from center field. They haven't won in a week. It's so cold, even the hot dogs are still frozen. Do we have to go to Wrigley Field tonight?"

Baseball fans know the truth about the cost of choosing to live life as a person of hope.

I was sitting in a pew last Sunday morning, settling back to enjoy a fine sermon by my good friend Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary. To my distress, however, a few minutes into the sermon, Cynthia began to refer to Harvard historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and her new bestseller *Wait Till Next Year*. It was a great sermon on "anticipating" and Dr. Campbell made skillful use of Doris Kearns Goodwin's book. My problem was that I had just finished that book and had already planned to use it for illustrative purposes this week. So pardon the repetition, but I simply have to use it again.

Goodwin grew up in Rockville Centre, Long Island in the 50s and inherited from her father a deep and abiding love for the Brooklyn Dodgers. When she was a little girl, her father gave her an official score book and taught her the eccentric intricacies of baseball score-keeping; numbers and symbols to record every play. It's part of the allure of the game – the endless statistics, numbers, records. Every day, all summer, she sat cross-legged in front of the radio, keeping track of every play – every player's performance, and every evening after dinner she replayed the game, play by play, for her father. Part of what I loved about the book was that I spent the same summer doing the same thing, keeping score, listening to the Pittsburgh Pirates on the radio and then replaying the game for my father.

The Brooklyn Dodgers were a good baseball team known primarily, however, for near misses. The team had won the National League pennant seven times and seven times had lost the World Series, including five straight losses to the New York Yankees. In 1949 after a devastating loss in five games to the Yankees, Goodwin writes "I first understood the pain, bravado and prayer woven into the simple slogan that served Dodger fans as a recurring anthem: Wait Till Next Year."

Doris Kearns Goodwin's life was organized around her hope for and commitment to the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Roman Catholic Church. Often the two blended and occasionally conflicted. In her confirmation class she was taught three types of prayers which she said regularly:

- the first, to bolster her own spiritual position
- the second for the poor souls in purgatory
- the third for her family and the Dodgers.

> "Please God, let this be the year. My father has been following the Dodgers since he was a little boy and he's never seen them win the Series. I would like that for him. I would like that for me.... Thank you God. Amen." [p. 111]

Finally, in 1955, the Dodgers won the World Series and it was that wonderful night that an old man stood up in a crowded Brooklyn deli and said the line Cynthia Campbell so skillfully quoted before I had a chance, "If I die tonight, I die a happy man."

That's essentially what an old man who appears in the second chapter of Luke, Simeon, says when he sees the infant Jesus. "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation."

But it is the strong, uncompromising hopefulness, year in and year out, in the face of disappointment and defeat – hope that refused to despair, the steady refusal to submit to disappointment, to give up or give in, the demanding discipline of hope, that I loved about the book and which illustrates the texts for this Sunday, the Sunday before Epiphany, the day the Christian church traditionally thinks about the Star of Bethlehem and the journey of the magi and their arrival, finally, in Bethlehem.

Much has been written about them although little is actually known: mysterious, strange visitors from another country, another culture, another race and religion. They are non-Jews in an otherwise exclusively Jewish story.

Magi from the East. That means Persia probably, Iran. Magi were seers, astrologers who observed the movement of the stars and then interpreted their meaning. From the beginning of time, every culture has its shamans, seers, witch doctors, prophets. Scholars take them and their role seriously. The late Mircea Eliade of the University of Chicago, one of the world's most distinguished scholars of comparative religion, taught that there are people in every culture who seem more attuned to the spiritual, the holy and the mysterious. The magi were those kind of people. They were, someone has quipped, the first century management and political consultants. Kings retained them for advice on military and political affairs. Businessmen hired them to give advice on the economy. Wealthy families sought their advice on marriage contracts.

What they actually saw, astronomers believe, was a convergence of the planets Jupiter and Saturn which created an unmistakably bright new star in the western sky. And so they consulted with one another and decided to follow the star and to see what it portended. I never thought much about that decision before, never thought about the skeptical response of their colleagues, their families, when they decided to pack up and follow a western star into the land of the Jews. My mental picture of the Journey of the Magi has been shaped by Christmas cards and *Amahl and the Night Visitors*: three men on an outing in the desert, fully equipped, with plenty of provisions, a little like an Outward Bound wilderness adventure. The reality, of course, was very different.

There is a wonderful poem by T.S. Eliot:

> "A cold coming we had of it
> Just the worst time of the year
> For a journey, and such a long journey

The ways deep and the weather sharp
The very dead of winter...
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the
terraces,
And the silken girls bring sherbet.
Then the camel men were cursing and
gambling
And running away, and wanting their
liquor and women,
And the night, fires going out, and the lack
of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns
unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high
prices
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
that this was all folly."
[*The Wasteland and Other Poems*, "The Journey of the Magi,"
Harvest Books, p. 69-70]

Why do you suppose they did it, traveled all those awful miles with voices ringing in their ears saying it was foolishness, following a star? Was it curiosity only? Was it greed? Or could it have been that in their hearts they kept a hope alive, that they were people of hope – impatient with the world as it was, with the suffering, cruelty, injustice, violence which was their world? Perhaps they longed for and hoped for another, better world. Perhaps they had a vision of a savior who would bring into human history that new, blessed world, and perhaps they hoped for a wise and just and compassionate King. Perhaps they were merely curious. But perhaps they were very strong, faithful, intentional people who were willing to wage their energy, their resources, even their lives to seek this King of Peace and to welcome and join his reign.

There were, one assumes, other alternatives. They could have continued the comfortable life of a magi. There were many things to believe in. There were alternate choices to make. They chose the way of hope. They chose to follow his star. And that ultimately may be the choice you and I must make. To believe, to have faith, to be a person of hope, finally, are choices we make.

The December 7 *New York Times Magazine* cover feature was entitled "The Decentralization of God." Benjamin Cheever, writer and son of the distinguished novelist John Cheever, contributed an essay, "God or BMW," in which he admitted to being a believer and a church-goer. Referring to the words of the Apostles' Creed he affirms weekly and which confound his elite, intellectual New York friends, he wrote:

> "It's no more absurd than to believe that a new BMW will greatly enhance my worth, and the BMW is a lot more expensive, and hard to keep tuned."

At the end he wrote very thoughtfully:

> "I think we don't often know what we believe. What we do know is what we mean to believe. And I mean to believe in the man they called King of the Jews. I mean to believe in his courage. I mean to believe in his wisdom. I mean to believe in his love."

We choose to believe. We choose to be hopeful. The opposite of following a star is to live without hope; it is to simply take life as it comes, day at a time, to want nothing more, to aspire for nothing, hope for nothing for the world, the nation, our city, our own personal lives. It is, some say, the spiritual epidemic of our particular age.

The late Lewis Thomas, one of our prophets, thought that hopelessness was the major characteristic of young people at the end of this century who, having concluded that there isn't any possibility that things can get better, politically, socially, racially, environmentally, educationally, medically, internationally, have decided simply to make and spend as much money as possible. He wrote:

> "What our species needs most of all right now, is simply a future." [*Late Night Thoughts...*, p. 62]

And one of the most distinguished modern Christian theologians, Jurgen Moltman, writes:

> "The other side of pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia, melancholy. Temptation consists not so much of the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us." [*The Theology of Hope*, p. 22]

We know now that the hopelessness that is produced by generational poverty with no light in the darkness, no hope, turns inevitably into a cultural sickness whose major symptom is the cheapness and valuelessness of human life. We know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that life without hope, life in poverty, life lived in the midst of the incredible wealth of our culture, but without decent housing, adequate education and health care, no jobs, no way to access the transportation and child care to get to the jobs there are – we know that life without hope is slowly overcome by melancholy, depression and death. We know about a similar dynamic with people who face serious medical challenges. Hope produces energy and life. The absence of hope denies life and leads to death. And, we know the reality of a similar psychological or spiritual dynamic: when we stop hoping, something important dies inside us.

The ancient prophet whose wonderful words we heard this morning was writing to a depressed and discouraged community of exiles in Babylon, miles from their home and culture and families, ridiculed, persecuted and ultimately absorbed by the culture around them. To them the prophet announced the appearance of a light – a star to follow – hope to give meaning and purpose and energy and will. "Rise – shine, your light has come."

It is ultimately a choice we make. In the same *New York Times Magazine* article I cited earlier, Jack Miles, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *God: A Biography*, writes:

> "Despair, according to a study published in the American Heart Association's Journal, is as bad for the human heart as a pack-a-day smoking habit. 'Steps should be taken' writes one doctor in the study, 'to try to change the cardiac patient's situation so they gain hope and become more optimistic.'" [p. 59]

And then Miles asks:

> "Steps should be taken by whom? In our day, religion often begins in despair – in personal despair that hardens the arteries, in cultural despair that hardens the heart... and moves from there to hope, not through argument, but through affiliation."
>
> Notice: the movement from despair to hope means finding others with whom to travel: affiliation.

Miles observes:

> "...to go it, but not alone. It happens, this decision does... A movement toward hope? Perhaps. A refusal, at least to despair."

To follow a star – a movement toward hope. A refusal to despair. A determination to go it, but not alone.

To follow a star is to see light in the darkness, to see signs of hope in the middle of tragedy and despair. I read last week a report from a Peace and Justice Center in Bethlehem, an ecumenical and interfaith project whose purpose is to bring together Muslim, Jewish and Christian young people. On Christmas afternoon there was a candlelight demonstration against continued Israeli confiscation of Palestinian land in, of all places, The Shepherds' Field. And participating together were Muslims, Christians and three busloads of Israeli peace activists. Sometimes the star shines in unexpected places.

Sometimes the church, this marvelous affiliation of men, women and children who consciously mean to be hopeful, actually lives up to its aspiration to be a light in the city.

For those privileged to see, it happened twice last week.

A former tutor was going to a movie. She had lost touch with her student years before and often wondered what had become of her. Still in school? Unmarried mother of three? On crack? Dead? At the ticket booth, eyes met, hesitated and then a recognition. "Dana, is that you? Yes, is that you, Nancy?" Her stepfather died, her brothers had dropped out of school, her mother is overwhelmed. "And you, Dana, what are you doing?" "I'm going to college. I work here to help out at home as much as I can. I'm going to make it." A light in the darkness because some refuse to despair, some choose to follow a star.

And then, at morning prayers a few days after Christmas, as church staff persons begin everyday with prayers, we were joined by a young woman who knew that as a member of the congregation, she would be prayed for that day. We begin by adding people and causes and concerns to the prayer list, church members, friends in the hospital, people we're worried about. There are no rules. You can put anyone on the list you want to. When her turn came, she said, "Pray for me. My husband is leaving me and our daughter." And so we did and afterward she told the minister who followed up that yes, her husband had just told her that he didn't want her or their daughter any more, and that her father had not spoken to her for years, and her mother was dealing with her own problems and her two brothers on the west coast were so involved in their own lives that they didn't even send a Christmas card. And she was working in a restaurant to try to keep things together, but that it felt like complete darkness and she had nowhere to turn and had even thought about ending her own life and then the letter came from the church saying she would be prayed for. A small light in the darkness. And so she came and before the morning was over she was in touch with a counselor and she was reminded that she was not alone, but in fact, part of a community of people who have decided to be star followers, to never, ever give in to despair, to continue to hope.

After the Dodgers won the 1955 World Series, life began to change for Doris Kearns. Neighbors began to move away. The Dodgers moved to California. Her mother died and her father, depressed, discouraged, announced that they would sell the house and move to an apartment.

It was not easy. One afternoon she was in the attic rummaging through old reminders of her childhood and her mother. She found the old score books she had meticulously kept, day after day. Suddenly her father appeared up the attic stairs.

She showed him the books and he said:

> "Remember we said if they just kept fighting, they'd make it in the end. And they did. We'll just have to do the same." Then for the first time in months, I saw my father smile. He pointed to a discarded calendar which had been printed by a Brooklyn company after one of the most discouraging defeats had destroyed the Dodgers' hopes. "Look at that," he said. And there it was, in large black type. Wait Till Next Year, the simple anthem that had served to comfort disconsolate Dodger fans and would now serve our family." [p. 250-251]

Friends, church members, visitors, guests, believers, non-believers, seekers: there are signs all around us. Not everyone recognized the Bethlehem child as the son of God, but some did.

Not everyone sees in the man Jesus the hopes and dreams of all the years, but some do.

Not everyone is willing to wager energy, time, money and life itself in his kingdom of justice, compassion and peace and love. But some are. Not everyone will follow his star, but some will.

Will you?

Whatever you face in the days, weeks, the year ahead ... listen...

Rise ... shine!
Your Light has come!

Amen.